THE WOMEN OF HAWAII

By Mary H. Krout.

Among all races of people, no matter how barbarous, there have been exceptional instances where women have held responsible posts and have played an important part in history. The women of Hawaii have been no exception to this rule.

Tall, erect, walking with easy and imposing carriage, with dark, flashing eyes, long, straight silken black hair, even those who had no claim to positive beauty possessed decided comeliness, to which their gentleness and grace lent an additional attraction. Under the old chiefs, even in the days of the Kamehamehas, the lot of the average Hawaiian woman was often one of great misery. By the working of the tabu, a religious interdiction evolved by a cruel priest-craft for the maintenance of their authority, a prohibition, which in some form or other has prevailed throughout most of the islands of the South Pacific, the women were completely cut off from many of the rational pleasures of life. Not only the woman's happiness, but life itself was dependent upon the husband's will. He could divorce her; even put her to death for certain offenses. She was forbidden to sit with him at table, to occupy the best places in the hut, to eat bananas or the choice fish set apart for her lord and master. It is related that the daughter of a chief was detected by a priest eating a banana. Because of her father's high rank her life was spared, but both eyes were put out.

In those primitive days, women were also forbidden to enter the heiaus, or temples, which, it was considered, were profaned by their presence. While the men were waging war with their neighbors, fighting sharks, fishing, or hunting sandal-wood, the women were preparing the taro, manufacturing tapa—the paper made by macerating the inner bark of the mulberry in water—which furnished their clothing and bed-covering. They did the cooking, gathered bananas, and strung leis—the thick garlands of brilliant and fragrant flowers with which the present generation still adorn their hair and throats. Infanticide was a common crime, which was encouraged, rather than punished. One woman confessed that she had killed eight of her children and buried them under the floor of her hut—a frequent place of sepulture. The excuse offered for the prevalence of infanticide was that the islands were small, and even with the equitable division of the land for taro patches and the construction of enormous artificial ponds which were well stocked with mullet, there was always danger of famine. It was considered expedient, therefore, to keep the population within reasonable bounds, even if the superfluous children were destroyed at birth. At the same time, parents who made way with their own offspring inconsistently accepted and adopted the children of their neighbors and friends, and these were often petted and indulged to a far greater degree than their own would have been. For peculiar reasons, which also obtained throughout a large part of Polynesia, descent was traced through the female line.

Notwithstanding the small esteem in which women ordinarily were held, there were among the old Hawaiians, female chiefs of high distinction, of great intelligence, and of splendid courage. Many of these were readily converted to Christianity and became the stanch friends and powerful champions of the missionaries. There was one notable exception, Liliha, the beautiful wife of Boki, who, in 1819, was acting governor of Oahu. She refused to accept the teachings of the missionaries, and with her husband, who was greatly her inferior in intellect and courage, attempted to seize the island and overthrow Kaahumanu, the queen regent. Both were reckless and extravagant, and the people were ruthlessly oppressed to furnish money which they squandered. They refused to obey the law of the land and finally, when Boki sailed to the South in search of sandal-wood, Liliha fortified Honolulu and held it for several days, until, at the command of her father, which she dared not disregard, she was forced to yield. She died finally in obscurity, mourning to the last for Boki who never returned from his ill-starred quest.

While the chiefs, or kings, as they were called after the accession of Kamehameha I, became enfeebled through licentiousness and intemperance, the actual management of the government passed into the hands of women. They possessed that high wisdom which has been characteristic of great women rulers of all races, a desire for the well-being of their subjects rather than for personal aggrandizement; and in conformity with this idea they gathered about them the best counsellors by whose opinions they were willing to be guided.

Even chiefesses of lower rank were invested with absolute authority, and could claim obedience and service from their people. This spirit still survives in a modified form, and was singularly illustrated not many years ago. A Hawaiian driving in her carriage saw a man misconducting himself in some manner peculiarly offensive to her, in the streets of Honolulu. She ordered her driver to halt, descended from the vehicle, walked to the offender and administered a sound box on the ear, rebuked him sternly, and then went on her way with the air of one who had done her duty. The explanation of this strange interference, which the man—a full-blooded native—did not dream of resenting, was simple; he and his kith and kin for generations, had been retainers of the family of the woman, of which she was still the recognized head.

All the labor on the large estates of the late Queen Kapiolani was performed by her former subjects, to the end of her life and this voluntarily, in recognition of the ancient law which, though nominally repealed, still remained in force.

After the accession of Kamehameha I and the evolution of the nation toward civilization, the favorite wife, chosen because of her superior character and ability, was made guardian of the minor princes. Upon the death of the king she received the title of Kuhina Nui which she retained until the proclamation of the heir apparent, when she became premier, holding this responsible office for life.

Four women filled this post between 1819 and 1864, virtual rulers, the kings being enfeebled mentally and morally, by vicious self-indulgence and consequently unfit or unwilling to govern.

Kaahumanu, a fitting wife for the great Kamehameha, was the first to hold the dual office of Kuhina Nui and premier, ruling efficiently from 1819 to 1832; Kinau, her successor and chosen by Kaahumanu, was in office until July, 1839; Kekauluohi until June, 1845, and Kamamalu until 1864, when the office was abolished and Anglo-Saxon influence began to dominate the islands. Kaahumanu and Kinau were women of remarkable force of character and intellectual vigor. Of Kekauluohi it is said: "she was far inferior to Kinau in fitness to rule, but had been carefully trained in her youth and made a repository of traditional lore, while of Kamamalu there is little to record. Kaahumanu, the most eminent of the Kuhinas, labored faithfully to ameliorate the condition of her sex, who suffered seriously through the oppressive civil and religious rule. Fearless and independent, she, with Keohuolani, a sister queen, determined to put an end to the hated tabu. The initiative steps were taken upon the very morning of the death of Kamehameha I.

As soon as "his iron hand was withdrawn," writes Professor Alexander, "the whole structure was ready to crumble into ruin." Upon the accession of the new king, Kamehameha II, ten days after the death of his father, the regent arrayed in a superb cloak of yellow feathers sacred to royalty, her attendants surrounding her and waving their kahilis, the "plumed staffs of state," proclaimed the new king, and then and there proposed to sit at the table with him and otherwise defy the tabus. The king, unlike his father, was weak and dissipated, and it fell upon Kaahumanu to quell a very serious rebellion fomented by the priests. In the battle which ensued, in which the insurgents were routed and dispersed, Manono, the wife of Kekuaokalani, the rebel leader, distinguished herself. Her husband was severely wounded early in the action, and was finally killed. The heroic Manono, we are told, during the battle fought undaunted by her husband's side. A few moments before he expired, she called out for quarter, but almost at the same moment was struck by a bullet in the left temple, and falling upon the dead body also expired. Having thus suppressed a dangerous rebellion, and restored peace, Kaahumanu became interested in the schools that were being established, began to study reading and writing, by setting an example, and encouraging the missionaries, and finally embraced Christianity. From that time there was a marked and radical change in her demeanor; from an arrogant and cruel ruler she became humane and just. So pronounced was the alteration that she was called thereafter by the natives, "the new Kaahumanu." In 1830 she made a tour through the windward islands, accompanied by the young king, with a view to lightening the burdens of the people, encouraging their education and improving their morals. It was under her regency and by her order that the first council of chiefs was convoked, in which a commercial treaty with the United States was negotiated—the first ever made by Hawaii with any foreign power. Kaahumanu finally retired to a cottage in the Manoa Valley, near Honolulu, now a part of the city, where she died, June 5, 1832. Professor Alexander says, "her place could not be filled, and the events of the next few years showed the greatness of the loss which the nation had sustained. The days of Kaahumanu were long remembered as days of progress and prosperity." Kinau, the successor of this great woman and chosen by her as premier, while possessing many admirable traits was not her equal, nor could she scope with the difficulties inseparable from her position, and others, graver still, growing out of the conspiracies of hostile chiefs, and of Charlton, the jealous and meddlesome British consul. Both his native advisers and the Englishman pandered to the king's vices, making him thereby a mere facile tool, a fact of which Kinau was perfectly cognizant.

The regent, not without cause, had conceived a violent perjudice against the Roman Catholic missionaries, who celebrated their first mass in Honolulu in the month of July, 1828. She did her utmost to prevent the spread of Catholicism and unjustly countenanced the persecution of the priests and their converts, as Kaahumanu had done before her. She carried her prejudice to the extreme of imprisoning two priests on board a brigantine in the harbor, keeping them supplied, however, with what provisions they required.

The queen consorts, the wives and daughters of high chiefs, were, also, many of them, women of powerful physique, inclined to embonpoint from lack of exercise and a fondness for poi—the chief article of diet with high and low alike. They were lawgivers, prophets and poets, and with few exceptions favored civilizations of paganism. To Kapiolani, one of these great reformers, for whom the wife of the late King Kalakaua was named, the ancient idolatry, cruel, gloomy and bloody, owed its final overthrow. It was based upon a dread belief in ghosts and malevolent spirits, and of the latter Pele, the presiding genius of the volcano Kilauea was feared most of all. It was believed that she inhabited the lake of fire in the center of the crater. Priests lived on the adjacent cliffs and received offerings from the people with which to placate the deity, plantains, fowls and black pigs, which were supposed to be duly sacrificed. Kapiolani visited the volcano and, notwithstanding the warnings of the priests who solemnly asserted that she would be stricken with instant death, marched down into the crater to the brink of the burning lake. She first gathered the ohia, a berry sacred to the goddess which it was customary to throw into the crater, but which, instead she boldly ate, saying: "Pele, here are your ohias: I offer you some, some I also eat."

As she stood beside the fiery lake surrounded by her retinue, she cried aloud: "The God who has made Kilauea is my God, and he alone has kindled the fires of the crater. I do not fear Pele. If I perish through her, then continue to stand in awe of her. But if I come away unharmed I hope you will believe in the true God."

The company waited in breathless silence, but there was no manifestation from Pele; from that hour her power waned and her priests were scattered.

The wives of the American missionaries who went out to the Hawaiian Islands early in the last century, were also remarkable women and left a lasting impression upon the minds and manners of the people. Foremost among them were Mrs. Thurston, Mrs. Bingham, and Mrs. Judd. Several have given graphic accounts of their excellences and they are certainly of a nature to dispossess one of the ideas that their life was one of ease and indulgence.

Mrs. Judd arrived in Honolulu in 1826 in the Thaddeus which was months making the voyage from Boston by the way of Cape Horn. The vessel was dirty and crowded, and she and her friends were obliged to wash their own clothing and cook their own food. The ship encountered several gales and at other times was becalmed for days. Finally, one bright Sunday morning they anchored in the harbor of Honolulu. The people had already embraced Christianity, and from the deck of the Thaddeus she saw, to quote her own words, "a mass of brown huts looking like so many hay-stacks." In the center of the village was a larger hut, the church, toward which the people were hurrying from every direction. There were hundreds, men and women, both wearing long, flowing mantles of blue, green and yellow tapa, throats and heads adorned with garlands of fragrant flowers.

When Mrs. Judd and her husband went ashore they were warmly welcomed, not only by the missionaries who had preceded them, but by Kinau who was Kuhina Nui at that time. Mrs. Judd gave an amusing description of her royal highness, who was enormously tall and stout. She wore a silk dress of some gay color, with the huge bonnet of that period loaded with plumes. She rode in a cart which had been painted sky blue, and sat with her feet dangling from the back of the vehicle which was drawn by twenty men. Kinau was, from the first, the stanch friend of the missionaries, looking to them for the moral regeneration of her people who, after the death of Kaahumanu, were sinking deeper and deeper into degradation, their vices acquired from contact with the lawless crews of traders and whaling vessels that touched at the islands.

She gave the new arrivals comfortable huts in which to live, and saw that they were abundantly supplied with food; but they knew that their post was no sinecure, and that they must make a full and satisfactory return for every favor granted them. They established additional schools, to which all the people came, the old and young, irrespective of rank. When the conch shell was sounded which announced the opening of the session, the people hurried to the schoolhouses which could not accommodate them all; the huts were deserted and all other business was for the time suspended. Such was their ardent desire to learn, they went about with school-books in their hands that they might improve every moment. The brunt of the teaching during this remarkable epoch fell upon the wives of the missionaries who not only labored in the schools but were required to receive into their households the children of the chiefs that they might be instructed also in the domestic arts,—the girls in sewing, cooking and general housework, and the boys in the use of tools. It sometimes happened that as many as twenty of these charges were committed to the care of a single family. In addition to this, the chiefs acquired a taste for American cookery and dropped in to dine or sup informally, as the impulse seized them. A communistic system had prevailed from time immemorial, and the contents of the poi calabash were free to all comers. They knew no reason why the same easy custom should not be applied to the Americans, leaving out of account the difficulties of preparing the more varied delicacies which they expected. It was not an uncommon thing for sixty or seventy persons, chiefs and their retinues, to drop in without previous notice to be served in detachments, in their turn, with the most careful regard for precedence, which the etiquette of the country ordained. The clothing of the missionary women wore out and there was nothing with which they could replace it, ships from Europe or the United States visiting Honolulu only at long intervals. The occasional gifts which they received from the queen, gay silks like those which she wore herself, they very properly considered unfit for people of their calling, and they certainly were ill-adapted to the practical every-day use for which they were required. They suffered especially from need of shoes.

The grass houses in which the natives lived were not convenient, being badly lighted and ventilated and with no provision for privacy, to which the Americans had always been accustomed. The framework of a dwelling house, sills, rafters, shingles doors and windows, was sent out from Boston, ready to put together. But it was an old, time-honored Hawaiian law that no one could occupy a loftier position, literally, than the king, or live in a better house, and it was months before Liholiho, who was then reigning, would consent to have the American house put up. Permission was asked repeatedly and as often refused. At length, two of the Americans went with their wives to make a last appeal. One of the women was about to become a mother, and when the king perceived her condition, realizing the hardship of her life, a stranger in a strange land, deprived of all the comforts to which she had been accustomed, he was touched with compassion and relented.

The house was an object of the greatest interest when it was finally completed, and when the king inspected it, he ordered one for himself, which, however, he stipulated, should be three instead of two stories high. The old house, constructed under so many difficulties, is still standing in Honolulu, in excellent condition.

One difficult task assigned Mrs. Judd was to make a coat for the king. He was a man of imposing proportions, in girth as well as height. She had no pattern and had never made such a garment, but, since refusal might entail the closing of the schools and put an end to their labors, she set her wits to work in the embarrassing dilemma; she ripped to pieces an old coat belonging to her husband, and from this model proceeded to devise some sort of a garment from a piece of fine cloth which had been presented the king by an English trader. His figure and that of Dr. Judd were quite unlike, and it was necessary to make proper allowance for this, which it appears the maker endeavored to do. She does not speak highly of her handiwork, but the king was not critical, and as no diastrous results followed he must have been satisfied.

Not only did these pioneer women possess tact and ingenuity, but they, too, were endowed with heroic courage. This was shown in many crises in which their safety, and even life itself was in danger. Mrs. Judd was an exemplification of this during the critical time when Charlton, the British consul, scheming to secure and hold ascendency over the weak and intemperate kings, at length carried his high-handed presumption to the extreme of taking possession of the islands in the name of the British crown, lowering the Hawaiian and hoisting the English flag. Dr. Judd, who was the king's close adviser, secured the archives, concealed himself in the tombs of the Kamehamehas and prepared dispatches to be sent by trusted messengers to England, well aware that the government would disavow Charlton's act as soon as the situation could be made clear. The king was also elsewhere in hiding and the British officers with a detachment of soldiers went to Mrs. Judd's house and endeavored to compel her to betray their whereabouts. Both threats and commands were disregarded, the brave woman refusing to give any information that might lead to their apprehension and capture. When Admiral Thomas was sent to restore Hawaiian supremacy, as it was known must happen, the wives of the missionaries took a prominent part in the rejoicings. They feasted their deliverers, preparing a great banquet with their own hands, out of such materials as were furnished them by the king, cakes, sweet-meats, fish, fowl and flesh, and waited upon their distinguished guests in person. They were a good deal chagrined over the disappointment of the English officers who, accustomed to wine in abundance, found the milder liquids provided for their refreshment a poor substitute. The admiral, however, commended their consistency, especially their wisdom in not placing ardent spirits before the king and his suite who were also present—a temptation the king could not have resisted.

At a later period the descendants of these pioneers founded Oahu College, a co-educational institution, which celebrated its semi-centennial a few years ago. This school was a means of education and enlightenment not only throughout the islands, but was patronized by the early residents of California who preferred to send their children here—a shorter and safer journey rather than to the eastern states overland, or by sea around the Horn. The liberal spirit that prevailed, especially affecting the political and industrial status of women, had its source in the influence of this remarkable school—an influence that was steadily maintained and knew no abatement, until annexation introduced the evils that follow the rule of the self-seeking and unenlightened political demagogue.

As time advanced, the native women shared in the decay and in the steady annihilation of their race, losing their prestige, their physical and mental vigor. Queen Emma, educated by her English guardian, was forced into relinquishing her claims to the throne by the machinations of the faction that unlawfully accomplished the accession of Kalakaua. She was a beautiful and virtuous woman, highly accomplished, and well qualified to rule. Bernice Pauahi, who married Mr. C. R. Bishop, who is still living, was a direct descendant of the great Kamehameha. She, however, refused to be drawn into the intrigues and difficulties which beset the sovereigns. She, too, was a woman of admirable character and of great mental and physical attractions. She was contented with the simple pleasures of private life, and upon her death bequeathed almost the whole of her large fortune to be used in the education and care of her people—a wish that has been faithfully carried out. Among numberless philanthropic institutions which she endowed the Kamehameha Manual Training school for boys, with its beautiful grounds, handsome buildings and modern and complete equipments, remains a splendid monument to her memory.

The late queen dowager, "the good Kapiolani," as she was affectionately called, spent the closing years of her life in retirement at her pleasant villa, in Waikiki, within sound of the surf, beating ceaselessly upon the reef. Here she was surrounded by a considerable retinue of women, ladies of rank, who waited upon her as if she were still the queen consirt, in office. She may be regarded as the last of the ancient type, although she was not descended from the Kamehamehas. The writer had the privilege of being received at her villa in May, 1893. The house was small and unpretentious, the front covered with a lattice work, two flights of steps, one to the right, the other to the left, leading to the front door wihch opened into the reception room. The queen and her attendants occupied apartments in the rear, and as the guests were admitted, a sound of animated voices, chattering, singing and laughing, could be heard distinctly. The delay of Kapiolani in making her appearance gave the visitors an opportunity to look about them—to note the spotless whiteness of the matting; the simple and pretty chintz hangings so well suited to the climate; the heavy and brilliantly polished koa furniture, the masses of flowers arranged in huge vases that stood upon the floor. There were also several fine kahilis—"the plume badges of office," which have been mentioned, with portraits and an excellent bust in marble of the dead Kalakaua. After some time soft, uncertain footsteps were heard approaching; then a stately figure appeared, which halted in the doorway, and leaned for an instant against the panel. It was Kapiolani—though it might have been Kaahumanu or Kinau, so perfectly had the native strain been perpetuated. She smiled graciously, displaying teeth that were still even and brilliantly white. Her thick, dark, lusterless hair was piled in a lofty coil on the top of her head. She wore a loose, flowing holoku of dull, rich black silk, with a portrait of the king in a brooch upon her bosom, and around her neck a lei, a garland, of the vivid yellow feathers of the O-O—once sacred to royalty.

When she finally entered and seated herself in an arm-chair like a throne, her interpreter, a handsome young woman, took her place beside the widowed queen and explained that, while she understood English and could speak it, she was unwilling to attempt it in the presence of strangers. She was extremely amiable, and it was evident, even when speaking through the medium of an interpreter, that she possessed both wit and good sense. She asked many questions about the World's Fair, which was about to open, and deplored the unsettled political conditions which would prevent the islands from being properly represented. When asked if she herself would visit the great exhibition, she shook her head and said that she had not decided; that she wished to go, but would have to take her women. Then she laughed, and added: "Their husbands are so much trouble."

When the visit came to an end, and she graciously extended her hand with a gentle "aloha," both the act and the word of farewell were prophetic. She, herself, was shortly to join those of her race, the great, the good, the wise, who had preceded her into the unknown, and she uttered the last farewell of a doomed and fading people. The tall and imposing figure withdrew, and as the drapery fell and covered the doorway behind her, the curtain seemed to have dropped upon the last act of a national drama that should know no revival.

He (having told a rather risque story)—"Well—don't you see the point?" She—"No—not if it's what I think it is."—Life.